

Effect of real world activities in the link between university reputation and students' transition to work (0258)

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Abstract

Although university reputation has emerged as an important determinant of graduate employment outcomes around the world, in South Africa this cannot be detached from the historic legacies of inequality and disadvantage. In the spirit of redress and equity, this study examines one of the probable interventions to minimise the gap between students from highly rated universities and those from so-called disadvantaged universities, with regard to employment outcomes. To achieve this, we tested for the mediating effect of real world activities in the relationship between university reputation and student perception of their transition – using the OLS regression of PROCESS macro in SPSS. The findings show that the indirect effect of university reputation on students' transition through real world activities is significant. Therefore, universities, and particularly those with a low reputation, can still assist their students to achieve a successful transition, by raising the level of their exposure to various real-world activities.

Keywords: Real world activities, South Africa, students' transition, university reputation.

Introduction

In South Africa, like other sub-Saharan African countries, it has been observed that new university graduates are often unsuccessful during job interviews because they lack some of the required skills. However, it is revealing to note that the situation is not the same for all university graduates in South Africa. Many of these graduates who lack the required skills are from certain universities regarded as disadvantaged universities – where they did not develop these skills or have the opportunity to interact with employers (Pauw et al., 2006). Oluwajodu et al. (2015) study of 300 unemployed graduates and 330 employed graduates confirmed this, in that it found that most of the unemployed graduates studied at the so-called disadvantaged universities, while a large proportion of those who were employed were from advantaged and highly ranked universities. The major reason for the disparity, according to graduate recruiters in their study, was that graduates from low-rated universities did not have the advantage of being exposed to real world activities, in terms of regular career exhibitions or any form of graduate recruitment exercise by employers.

However, highly ranked universities, because of their reputation of having high educational standards, facilities and equipment, are visited regularly by employers to offer these programmes. The study of Oluwajodu et al. (2015) is in line with the qualitative studies of (Bhorat et al., 2012, Walker and Fongwa, 2017) which were also carried in South Africa. In addition, Walker and Fongwa (2017) found that the geographical location of universities (which in the South African context is synonymous with university reputation) also plays a vital role in determining the employer relationship with universities. The participants in their study felt that the relationship with employers is stronger and easier with urban universities – compared to those in rural areas.

In the South African context, this stratification which in effect produces exclusion for some groups of learners, is a reflection of the historic legacies of inequality and disadvantage, which linger on and play a significant role in the employability and employment outcomes of graduates (Walker and Fongwa, 2017). In the spirit of redress and equity, universities need to find ways of ameliorating the problem. Anand et al. (2016) suggested that exposing undergraduates to real world activities – especially work experience – could possibly bridge the gap between graduates from highly rated universities and those from the disadvantaged ones in terms of employment outcomes, at least in the short term.

In line with the above, the purpose of this study is to empirically investigate the indirect effect of university reputation on students' transition through students' exposure to real world activities. Historically, separate studies on how students' transition is related to (a) university reputation and (b) exposure to real world engagement, have been carried out. These studies however have failed to consider the possible link between students' perception of their university reputation and exposure to real world activities – which may in turn predict the perception of students about their transition.

Literature Review

Students' transition

Undergraduate transition refers to the process by which university students change from being undergraduates to becoming part of the labour market. Some factors have been identified as determinants of undergraduates' perception of their transition (Pitan, 2016a, Jackson, 2015). Such factors among others include university reputation and exposure to real world activities. As one of their responsibilities, universities are expected to give appropriate attention to ensuring the smooth

transition of students through to the labour market (Finch et al., 2013). In so doing, universities are potentially responding to student motivations for entering university as well as justifying huge investment by government in higher education (Pitan and Atiku, 2017).

University reputation

The belief of society around the world, is that highly rated universities usually produce graduates that are more employable and preferred by employers (Drydakis, 2016, Oluwajodu et al., 2015, Qenani et al., 2014). One of reasons for the preference is that highly-rated universities, because of their reputation have the advantage of exposing their students to real world activities. Therefore, the argument is that attendance at an advantaged university is likely to confer on students some unobserved characteristics such as self-confidence and self-efficacy, commitment, transferable skills, and personality characteristics that companies require. Thus, the more students perceive their university to be of high reputation, the more they tend to perceive themselves to be at an advantage in terms of a smooth transition to the labour market – compared with their counterparts from low-rated universities.

Real world activities

These are activities that enable students to make connections between theory and practice. These activities include work experience of any form, practical classes, field trips, and career fairs. There is evidence (Pitan, 2016a, Lee, 2012) that students' exposure to these activities develops in them the necessary qualities for enhanced employability and a smooth transition. Such qualities include reflection and evaluation, transferable skills, self-confidence, self-efficacy, emotional intelligence, professional contacts, and professional qualities.

Relationship among the three concepts

From the literature, it can be deduced that university reputation is an essential factor that determines students' exposure to real world activities – which is also likely to impact on their perception of the nature of their transition. This considered, the study hypotheses (H_1) that are also depicted in the conceptual model (Figure 1), are:

1. University reputation will have a significant, positive effect on students' exposure to real world activities.
2. Students' exposure to real world activities will have a significant, positive effect on their perception of their transition.
3. Students' exposure to real world activities will mediate the relationship between university reputation and students' perception of their transition.

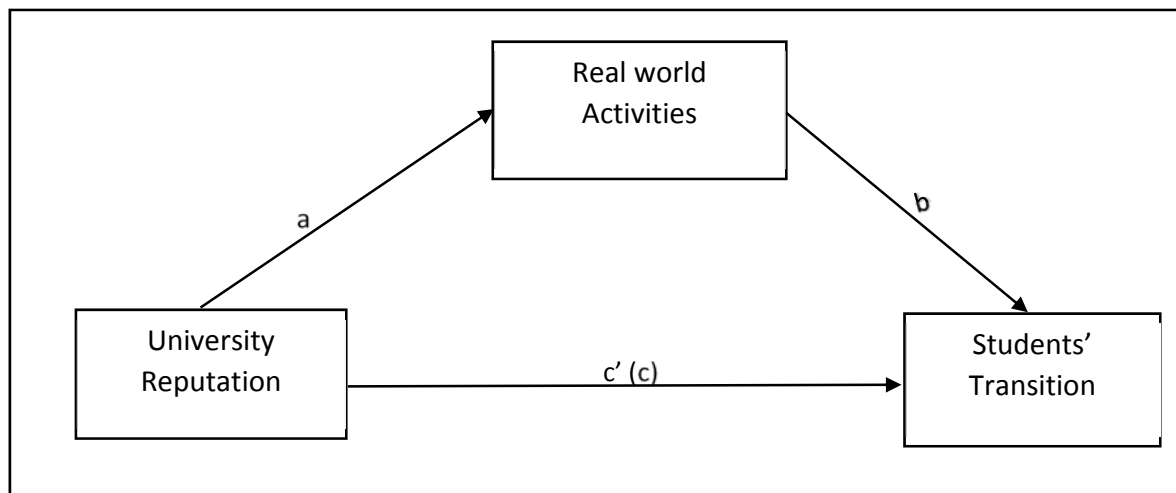


Figure 1: Proposed conceptual model.

Methodology

Data for the study were collected from 402 final year students in two South African universities through an adapted five-point Likert rating scale questionnaire – ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). The Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the instrument is 0.860 ($\alpha > 0.7$). Respondents were drawn from four broad disciplines: Education (25.4%), Management studies (25.9%), Science and agriculture (30.8%), and Law (17.9%). There were more female respondents (58.7%) than male respondents (41.3%). OLS Regression through PROCESS macro in SPSS 25, with bootstrapping at the 95% confidence interval (Hayes, 2017), was used for data analysis.

Results and Discussion

The results for hypothesis 1 confirm that university reputation has a significant, positive effect on students' exposure to real world activities ($b = 1.033, p < .001$). This implies that the students believe that those of them from high-rated universities have more exposure to real world activities

compared to their peers from low-rated universities. This concurs with Walker and Fongwa (2017), Oluwajodu et al. (2015) and Drydakis (2016)

Students' exposure to real world activities is also found to be a significant predictor of students' perception of their transition ($b = .199$, $p < .001$). This supports existing research that identifies students' exposure to real-world activities (e.g. in the form of work experience, employers' participation in course design and delivery, career fairs, site visits) as being the most important factor that enhances student employability and their smooth transition to work (Jorre de St Jorre and Oliver, 2018, Anand et al., 2016, Finch et al., 2013, Jackson and Wilton, 2017, Mason et al., 2009, Pitan, 2016a, Pitan, 2016b). This is an indication that students value these activities in relation to their smooth transition.

The findings for the mediation effect show that there is a significant, indirect effect of university reputation on students' transition through real world activities ($b = 0.207$, 95% CI = 0.14 - 0.28). This indicates that real world activities is a mediator in the relationship between university reputation and students' transition. The mediator could be said to account for half of the total effect ($P_m = .49$). Real world activities is therefore suggested as being one of the variables that can significantly bridge the gap between university reputation and students' perception of their transition – at least in the short term and particularly for disadvantaged groups (Anand et al., 2016).

Implication

A major inference from the above findings is that South African universities, and especially the low-rated ones, can still strengthen and enhance their students' perceived employability by raising the level of their exposure to real world activities. This can be realised *inter alia* by developing a strong partnership with industry and alumni, making internships compulsory for students before graduating, and engaging in more practical classes than just teaching theory.

To minimise discrimination by employers, low-rated universities located in rural areas can make it their responsibility to strongly motivate and encourage employers to come to them for career fairs and recruitment activities – for example by offering to sponsor their transportation and accommodation.

The South African government and the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) need to focus on and support the ‘silently’ excluded universities through the provision of additional financial resources and institutional improvement of factors that affect academic reputation – such as research intensity, research-based teaching and infrastructural facilities (Drydakis, 2016). The government can also put in place programmes that sensitise employers to issues of discrimination based on university reputation.

In addition, to gain employers’ confidence in students and graduates from low-rated universities, information about the outstanding performances and successes of students, graduates and even lecturers from such universities – should be widely publicised (Pitan, 2010).

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